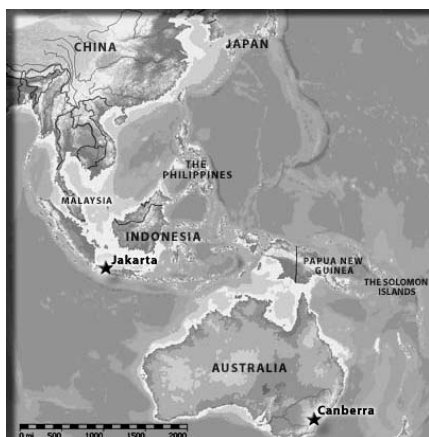

The War of Ideas in Southeast Asia

Interview with Kenneth Ward

Interviewed by John Whisenhunt, Editor

Abstract: *Mr. Ward, a former Australian Foreign Affairs officer and intelligence analyst, shares his views on his nation's role in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. He describes Australian difficulties and successes in dealing with Islamic communities, Islamic extremism, and the need for greater cross-cultural awareness.*



Southeast Asia in context. (Dept of Defense)

IO Sphere: *Some observers criticize the West for a lack of in-depth understanding of our adversaries. How do you think we're doing in terms of developing and practicing true cultural awareness, especially in Southeast Asia (SEA)?*

Mr. Ward: I think we've progressed a long way in the past few years, but we recognize we started from a low base of understanding the religion of Islam, and how to talk to Muslims. But since 9-11, and particularly since the (2002 & 2005) Bali bombings, the Australian government has become aware of Muslim sensitivities in SEA. On the other hand, we tend to forget that Muslims in SEA tend to be very concerned over what happens to Muslims in Australia. I think over the past 12 months we have shown, both in the government and elsewhere, much less sensitivity to the feelings of our own Muslim community. There are several hundred thousand: it's not a large community compared to other immigrant communities in Australia—the majority is Lebanese. But I think we're throwing too much at them at the same time. We're relating the Global War on Terror to the successful integration of Muslims in Australia—the successful adaptation of Muslims to modernity. We urge them to adopt different attitudes towards women, we question their wearing of the veil, and so forth. So I think it would be quite normal for some Muslims in Australia to feel what Indonesians describes as being “cornered.” That's a word that is used a lot by Indonesian Muslims; that the world has them cornered—in other words putting a great deal of pressure on them. I think there is a danger that criticizing Muslims in western countries could become electorally

popular as anti-Islam. One of our major newspapers has been running headlines such as “The Unacceptable Face of Islam,” about Muslim attitudes towards women, and some days this newspaper can run up to six articles that Muslims would perceive as anti-Islam. There is a kind of disconnect with successful operations towards Muslims in SEA. Our leaders always have dialogs with Muslims when they travel to SEA countries with Muslim populations, particularly Indonesia. It is widely accepted we need dialog. Many people understand we're pressuring our Muslim community in Australia, and the danger is that now and again frustrated Muslims may turn to terrorism to express that frustration. So I think that's how I view Australia's current cultural awareness.

IO Sphere: *You've spent a considerable portion of your professional life living and working in Indonesia. This state's traits of a large, young, culturally diverse Islamic population all seem similar to parts of Southwest Asia. Do you find any parallels relevant to the current struggle against Islamic extremism, which seems focused on the Middle East?*

Mr. Ward: There are. For a start, the Middle East has exerted more influence over Indonesia in the last 20 years. There are a lot more pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia; Arabic is studied more now; Islamic modes of dress are becoming more widespread. These things did not use to characterize the communities in Indonesia and Malaysia. And unfortunately, through terrorism too. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) is a major Indonesian extremist group heavily influenced by Al-Qaeda (AQ), though I don't think JI has made any independent contribution to Islamic terrorist ideology. I think all of JI's ideology is derived from AQ—even the idea of a caliphate. JI is a descendant of the Dal Al Islam or DAI movement, which did not advocate a caliphate. Its goal was simply establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia, period. From AQ or somewhere in the Middle East, JI has taken on the idea of the caliphate. So in many ways there are similarities. I'd say there has been a slow process of Arabization of Islam in Indonesia, particularly in the last 20 years.

IO Sphere: *Some observers feel the whole idea of influence operations is too complex, and has too many players or stakeholders. Do you find any group or state that is doing this sort of thing well? Is anyone a good model?*

Mr. Ward: For SEA, the Singaporeans are developing a very good model for influence operations. They have been the object of a certain amount of bias and prejudice from their Muslim neighbors, but they are developing ways of eliminating that sort of prejudice. They have worked toward a much better relationship with Indonesia over the past three or four years, particularly with the successful handling of the (2005) Tsunami situation. That's something one can talk about in considerable detail. The US had the best opportunity to positively influence Indonesia as it had for a very long time. The technical parts went extremely well, and the end result should have been a reduction in anti-Americanism. To what extent that happened is hard to say. The Tsunami had a devastating impact, but it took place in a remote area of the country. So even though Indonesians living in Jakarta and other parts of Java knew the Americans were helping out, I think the impact on the whole of Indonesia was much less because of the remoteness of the disaster area itself. I think America only received the gratitude of only one area of the country, and didn't receive the same outcome in terms of a reduction in anti-Americanism as if the disaster took place on Java itself. But this is the sort of intervention we are seeking. Though we certainly don't want to arrange for any disasters [laughs]. But, I think the Tsunami coordination seemed to have no flaws at all, and provides a very good example of coordination with a wonderful impact. I know the response from the disaster site was great, and though I won't say Indonesians living on Java and near the capital are indifferent to the outlying regions, the impact would have been far greater had it happened closer to Jakarta. As far as models go, Singapore is really worth studying. They were conscious for half-a-dozen years that they had a poor reputation in Malaysia and Indonesia, and they handled that Tsunami with a great deal of diplomacy and without arrogance. On the other front, the Singaporeans have developed a very effective de-indoctrination program for terrorists in prison. They are also successful in sending Muslim spokesmen around the rest of SEA and the outside world. So they really understand the need to show sympathy towards Islam, while trying to de-indoctrinate extremists in their communities.

IO Sphere: *In the past 25 years, Australia seems to have really evolved its regional role as a Pacific power. Based on your time in the Foreign Service, and as an experienced observer, how do you view Australia's current and future roles in the fight against extremism?*

Mr. Ward: I think there's a danger we're going to be overstretched. We are clearly the most powerful country in the south Pacific, and the burdens we are assuming—including Timor—are very demanding and very heavy. There has been violence in East Timor which has prompted us to send troops, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea (PNG) is not entirely stabilized. We are essentially the main guarantor of stability for the entire south Pacific. But we are also assuming burdens far away from there, such as in the anti-proliferation exercises/

maritime exercises being carried out against North Korea. We have troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, and many who follow defense issues think our forces are now heavily over-extended. I would see it in a slightly different manner: that the educational base in Australia has not been expanded adequately to give us expertise in all the countries in which—or towards which—we've decided to play a role. For example we have very few Middle Eastern institutes in Australia, and Arabic is not widely spoken at all

among Australians who are not of Arab origin themselves. Not every state or city has a Middle Eastern institute in any of its universities. The government itself has few Arabic speakers. We have—as a sign of being overextended for example—never had an embassy in Afghanistan, and we still don't. And yet we've troops there since 2001-2002. We've had an embassy in Iraq, but only since the heavier combat phase of the war ended. And yet we've been fighting in a war in a country we've not seen as important enough to post an ambassador there. Now that, and the fact we have limited knowledge of either country—plus the lack of an embassy—shows the lack of depth in our relationship with those two countries before we entered conflict. So we don't have a strong knowledge base of either Iraq or Afghanistan. It's true we're working within an alliance with the US, more so than making an independent assessment of our own national interest. So we're really not very knowledgeable. But there's a gap between some of the commitments we're making, and some of the knowledge base that should exist to allow Australia to operate effectively. As far as I'm aware, no university in Australia teaches Afghan languages—and that's dangerous, to have no basis for a war we've been participating in for some time. In the war with Japan (WWII)—this was a war of necessity, not choice—we had a knowledge base before the war began. But 60 years later, an industrialized country must have a proper knowledge base that it can rely upon when it does become engaged in a conflict. Australia is without question the most important guarantor of stability & security in the south Pacific, and we must be more careful measuring our priorities in the Asia-Pacific as a whole, or outside the region. I see this hiatus between making a commitment, and having the knowledge base with which we can help the people understand why we've made these choices. So, we're really not strongly knowledgeable in the Middle East.



Australian soldier patrols the Indonesia/East Timor border. (MOD Australia)

And though our troop commitment is not really that large, the concern is what happens when it is a south Pacific contingency and no other power will be available? We may not have the troops to send. Certainly we have our commitments to East Timor, which we undertook in 1999 under UN auspices, and PNG as a former Australian mandate—so those are major priorities. But I think we need to be cautious about making commitments further afield. I can't recall another time when Australian forces were so heavily engaged in different places around the world.

IO Sphere: It's been a tough start to this century.

Mr. Ward: Yes, very much so. I think we have a three part problem: how to deal with terrorists; how to deal with extremists; and how to deal with the Muslim community as a whole—especially those at home. I think we have to see how interrelated these are. If we are seen as arrogant and suspicious of Muslim constituencies within our own borders, that will give extremists—whose main argument is the west is fighting a war against Islam—well, that will give them more ammunition. I don't think we're being nearly as careful as we can on that front. For example, former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw made a rather strange statement (in Oct 2006) after a Muslim woman wearing a face veil came to see him, stating that made him very uncomfortable. It is hard to conceive of a woman having the courage to visit a member of parliament unaccompanied. Muslim women who wear face veils are more likely to be Salafi (traditionalist) Muslims, than otherwise. And they are typically not going to be calling on members of parliament (MP) alone, or even with their husbands—they simply do not do that. So any Muslim man in Straw's constituency who has a grievance—and I say "man" because that too is a traditional male role—he has something to resolve. Well, it will be the husband who normally does that. So I find that statement gratuitous, and extremely insensitive: it should not be made when a nation like Britain faces a terrorist threat. That kind of statement gives one the impression that the British political elite is opposed to all sorts of Muslim practices, which are really none of our business. Other countries have to put up with young people wearing the strangest sorts of clothing—hardware on their noses [laughs], and no politician is going to admit he's uncomfortable if a young man with green hair and multiple eyebrow rings comes to call at his parliament office. If we are able to cope with our young generation's bizarre practices, why is it difficult to accept a Muslim face veil? If such social tolerance exists toward unconventional clothing and personal adornments, we can certainly show tolerance to much more conservative practices. We're dealing with a continuum of attitudes here, terrorism at one end—close to that is extremism—and then the Muslim community as a whole. We should not give any ammunition to terrorists by indicating that there is a great deal about Islamic practices we disapprove of. The situation could be deteriorating in that respect. We may be making headway against terrorism, we may have some impact on the popularity of extremist

ideology itself, but I think this year (2006) our relationship with Muslim communities has deteriorated. There was the issue like the (Prophet) Mohammed cartoons (originating in Denmark); it may be difficult for us to understand why that can provoke violence response. When something like that happens, we should condemn the cartoonists, though without suggesting any punishment, because it's simply not illegal in the West. But we should do something. Similarly the Pope's (Sep 2006) comments (perceived as anti-Islamic) were unfortunate, though it didn't lead to any lethal violence anywhere as far as I know. These things are happening at the wrong time. We must do everything we can to establish we are not at war with Islam, and to separate terrorism from the Muslim community as a whole. This has been a bad year in terms of improving our relationship with the Muslim world.

IO Sphere: Folks of all walks of life say "be respectful, have some understanding," yet both the proper message and the damage can spread so rapidly!

Mr. Ward: Yes. I don't think our leaders understand well enough that Muslims have a much stronger sense of community than other religious groups. Educated Muslims rally round fellow Muslims who they think are being badly treated. For example, a Muslim newspaper in Indonesia will mention that Muslims in Britain are the subject of discrimination, and they'll be a much stronger sense of solidarity—much more so than say the global Christian community. And I think we lose sight of that, thinking we can compartmentalize Muslims from the rest of the world. Statements made in Australia that are perceived as anti-Muslim can be reproduced in SEA in a matter of hours. Misstatements and slips of the tongue will be often be seen as deliberate, and showing malice toward Muslims..

IO Sphere: Well, we'd better get you to the seminar. Thank you for your time this morning, sir.

Mr. Ward: You're quite welcome. 